

THE FINAL BLOW TO THE

CURTISS AIRPLANE DIVISION

by Richard A. Morley

The beginning of the end of Curtiss-Wright's Airplane Division came when their XP-87 *Black Hawk* was canceled October 15, 1949, in its entirety. The findings report revealed the Review Board favored the competitor, Northrop's XF-89 *Scorpion*. There were several reasons for the decision which led to the termination of the program.

The findings report was not complete as a number of XP-87 advantages were omitted; therefore the Review Board did not have a complete picture of the flight test activity. The procurement recommendation was made on this basis.

The wing on the XP-87 was altitude limited. The Air Force made the decision that the airplane should operate higher up to 70,000 feet. C-W priced another wing which was cost excessive. The regular engineering personnel normally associated with design review, pricing and cost negotiations were not involved with the contract amendment. This was handled by upper level management presumably to insure reduction of other program losses. The original wing design, limited to approximately 45,000 feet, was in conformance with the alti-

tude requirements established by the Air Force! Further, the findings report revealed the Northrop XF-89 was favored by the project pilots, specifically Major Richard Johnson. It was simply a better airplane, in part due to the wing design on the XP-87. It was indeed unfortunate. However, there was no doubt that Curtiss-Wright was "screwed." It remains to be seen whether it was done by themselves or by the Air Force – or by Harry Truman.

Earlier, Guy Vaughan, C-W's President, had a meeting with Barrows which turned ugly, many harsh words were exchanged and Vaughan was thrown out of Barrows' office. Vaughan retired from Curtiss soon after.

The replacement for Guy Vaughan was Roy Hurley, an ex-machine shop foreman who worked his way up to Director of Manufacturing Engineering at the Ford Motor Company. He was a dynamic person; however, he had no formal education, was not aero oriented and knew nothing of aircraft R&D. He would not listen to the Curtiss management to how the aeronautical community operates.

All this led to a big giant step downward in the demise of the Airplane Division,

Prior to the entry of the United States into World War II (about the same time that Germany invaded Poland in 1939), Curtiss-Wright was expanding in every area. Robert Earle, who was in charge of propeller operations at Buffalo, was made Curtiss-Wright vice-president in charge of the Propeller Division and moved to a new plant in New Jersey. He held this position throughout the war and in 1949 was elected Senior Vice-President in charge of the Propeller Division and the Airplane Division. Earle was a Navy man, a pilot, spent a couple years in the Washington office and was assistant to the General Manager at Buffalo before becoming involved with propellers. Bob Earle was probably the last hope for the Airplane Division which had been consolidated at Columbus.

Earle had received a Request for Proposal from BuAer for an Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) shipboard airplane. Knowing that Columbus was desperately in need of a product, he con-

tacted Walter Tydon, then former Chief Engineer at Buffalo and XP-87 Project Manager, and told him to do anything possible to get aboard the program. Tydon was transferred to the New York office where he immediately began to organize the proposal. He went on an ASW exercise with the Navy to obtain first hand the information required for the RFP submittal.

Tydon made several attempts to attract the Navy to accept the Curtiss-Wright proposal even though there were no requirements for the additional effort:

- A full-scale Plywood mock-up was built which impressed the BuAer personnel.

- Wind tunnel model tests to prove the Curtiss performance figures were conducted at Cornell's Aeronautical Lab which was donated to the university by Curtiss-Wright at the closing of Buffalo operations (Tydon had to wait in line with other contractors to use the facility while his ex-employees did not show him any preference).

- The last bonus was an appendix showing other applications that carriers lacked – cargo airplane (COD), litter and personnel transport.

In September, 1949, BuAer notified Curtiss-Wright and Grumman that they would be awarded study contracts. In addition, Hurley said he would be in the New York office the following day. Instead of helping to celebrate the contract award, Hurley announced to the stunned C-W personnel that he was going to visit Admiral Pride at BuAer the following day and tell him that Curtiss-Wright would not accept an experimental study "deal." He would only accept a production contract. The rest is history. Grumman got the contract and Curtiss-Wright was out of the military airplane business forever. It was not the demise anymore, it was the burial.

In November 1950 Curtiss-Wright was removed from the Columbus facility and North American Aviation became the new tenant at 4300 East Fifth Avenue.

In January 1993 Curtiss-Wright, based in Lyndhurst, New Jersey, was put up for sale. There were no takers. □

REFERENCES:

"Whatever Happened to Curtiss-Wright?" by Robert W. Fausel, © 1990, ISBN 0-89745-080-9, Sunflower University Press

"The Saga of the P-40 and the Curtiss Airplane Division - Its Rise and Demise" by Walter Tydon, © 1995.

Personal interview - Robert W. Fausel, August, 1996 (Towson MD).

Personal interview - Walter Tydon, June, 1996 (Phoenix AZ).



Opposite: The Curtiss XP-87 in flight, the last attempt by Curtiss for military fighter contract. (Photo from the AAHS collection)

Above: Two ground views of the Curtiss XP-87. (Photos from the AAHS collection)

Left: Inflight view of the Curtiss XP-87, the final contender in its bid for a successful fighter plane contract. (USAF Photo from R.E. Williams collection)